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ABSTRACT

Special admissions programs may offer access into higher education for students who, for various reasons, do not meet the institutions' standard admissions criteria. Once the special admissions status has been granted, these programs provide support to these students. This paper is not a critique of special admissions programs in general or specifically. What the paper focuses on is an examination of one dimension of one such program at one institution. The paper provides an examination of the communication contained within documents produced by the special admissions program at a large Midwestern university, pointing out that these documents are created for dissemination to students (and their parents) that are specially admitted to the university through the special admissions program. It contends that an examination of these documents can provide useful information regarding how and if these students are engaged (or dis-engaged) in their education at this particular university. According to the paper, the documents examined were booklets, letters, and brochures created by the special admissions program and provided to targeted students between the years 1993 through 2000. Findings suggest that, because the special admissions program appears to be consistent with the epidemiological model of at-risk students, the program has the potential to leave students feeling isolated from other "normal" college students and disempowered to change their situations--it makes students feel at fault for their academic "malady." Ultimately, the program's literature informs in the student the belief that academic success is solely the responsibility of the student. (Contains 15 references.) (NKA)

Running Head: SPECIAL ADMISSIONS

Special Admissions Students: Dis-Engaged from the Educational Enterprise

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Introduction

Students who are at-risk may exist in academic isolation within their institutions of higher education. Lacking formal networks or programs for academic support specific to their needs, they may face alone multiple obstacles that can hinder their success at the university. The problem of isolation and lack of academic support has been addressed by some institutions of higher education through the creation of special programs targeted for assisting students deemed to be at-risk. According to Garard and Hunt (1998), special admissions programs provide "academic and administrative support for a selected group of first year students who show potential for college level work" (p. 14). Although each program may have unique features, generally these programs are established with two purposes. First, through special admissions, they offer access into higher education for students, who for various reasons, do not meet the institutions' standard admissions criteria. Second, once the special admission status has been granted, these programs provide support to these students. This support may include any or all of the following: academic advisement, tutorials, assessment, peer and faculty mentoring, placement in restricted (and oftentimes smaller enrollment) sections of some courses, career counseling, learning skills courses, and specialized workshops.

Intent and Focus of Paper

The authors of this paper do not question the good intentions of institutions that provide specialized services for at-risk students. Nor do we disagree with the philosophy of providing access to higher education to students who may otherwise be denied such opportunity. Furthermore, we are not advocating disbanding any programs that exist to assist students who are academically at-risk. Nor are we attempting to tell such programs what services should or should not be provided. We recognize that each institution that has a special support unit for at-risk

students has a unique history and mission. We also recognize that most likely, the services provided by these programs have been forged by their respective administrators out of hard won battles, working with tight budgets and scarce resources.

Thus, this paper is not a critique of special admissions programs in general, or specific. What we focus on in this paper is an examination of one dimension of one such program at one institution. In this paper we provide an examination of the communication contained within documents produced by the special admissions program at a large Midwestern university. These documents are created for dissemination to students (and to their parents) that are specially admitted to the university through the special admissions program. We believe that an examination of these documents should provide useful information regarding how and if these students are engaged (or dis-engaged) in their education at this particular university.

The Documents

The documents examined were booklets, letters, and brochures created by the special admissions program and provided to targeted students (either prospective or already admitted through the special admissions program.) The documents we examined were distributed between the years 1993 through 2000. With the exception of updating information to indicate new services provided, the documents changed little over the course of these seven years. The language and the information, for the most part, was re-issued verbatim from year to year. Documents examined were: (1) welcoming letters to the students from the Director of the program, (2) letters to the parents, (3) the special admissions handbook, and (4) a brief brochure about the special admissions program.

Our Findings

Epidemiological Models: Positioning the Special Admissions Students Outside the Educational Enterprise

Special admissions programs are designed to provide academically at-risk students with the support services that they need to succeed in college. The special admissions program offers "students who did not meet these requirements [the University's regular admissions requirements] the opportunity to attend [the University] under selected admission" (The Road to Graduation Student Handbook, 2000, p. 17). The special admissions program provides valuable resources for college students. However, it does appear, through the language used in the documents, to be designed to "cure" the at-risk college student of their academic "illness." As Fassett (1999a) argues, "it is important to recall that the very metaphor of risk is often associated with the likelihood of bodily harm. We risk dangers unknown, something precarious or uncertain is usually 'risky'—so it should come as no surprise that the roots of the term's use lie in medical, epidemiological discourse" (p. 4). While we believe that selected admission programs have the special admissions (at-risk) students' best interest at heart, we are concerned that these programs run the risk of treating students like patients, and ultimately positioning students in a "me" versus "the institution" dichotomous position.

Special admission students: Innate deficiencies and inadequacies

Special admissions programs may be examples of how the epidemiological model (or medical model) of at-risk students can be debilitating to those students it is intended to help. The epidemiological models of at-risk place the blame for educational failure squarely on the shoulders of the students who are experiencing difficulty. A student at-risk possesses some individual trait (e.g., race, class, ethnicity, etc.) that is considered a deficiency by others (such as school administrators, teachers, and other students). Beyond such factors as race, ethnicity, and

class, at-risk students have also been identified as possessing limited proficiency in English, coming from a low income family, and having a parent without a high school diploma (Chesebro, McCroskey, Atwater, Bahrenfuss, Cawelti, Gaudino, & Hodges, 1992, p. 324). At-risk students are additionally found to be more apprehensive about communication and perceive themselves to be less competent when communicating with strangers and acquaintances (Chesebro, et al., 1992; Rosenfeld, Grant, & McCroskey, 1995). As Johnson (1994) argues, "an epidemiological, medical, disease, or child-deficit model of educational risk assumes that the causes of children's failure in school reside primarily, if not exclusively, within the child's physical being" (p. 37). For example, the at-risk student might be a member of a race or ethnicity that has been labeled as having the potential for educational failure. The label or stigma is carried with a student throughout his/her educational experience.

The negative effects of the epidemiological model of educational risk can be seen throughout the literature of the special admissions program. The mission of the program states "Many students, although intellectually capable of college level work, are handicapped by inadequate preparation in reading, writing, speech, and study skills" (The Road to Graduation Student Handbook, 1995, p. 2-3). The language that the program utilizes positions the student as possessing something that is medically or innately wrong with him/her. The epidemiological models of risk presuppose that risk factors are specific child inadequacies or deficiencies. Johnson (1994) argues that "just as disease is understood as the exclusive property of the infected individual, so too learning problems are conceptualized as the exclusive property of the student" (p. 37).

Two objectives of the program are: "(1) to provide support service programs to students who are considered academically deficient and (2) to identify by means of diagnostic testing,

entering freshmen who can profit by focused help in selected basic skills" (The Road to Graduation Student Handbook, 2000, p. 4). These examples illustrate how the medical metaphors of at-risk are played out in the literature provided for special admission students. Embedded in these objectives is the assumption that a student's academic failure is an innate deficiency for which educators can prescribe a cure. These cures can lead to "survival" through the development of survival skills and the use of survival texts. The survival reference is found several times in the literature (A Survival Handbook, 1993, p. 3-5).

Critics of these models argue that there is more to educational failure than a student's innate deficiencies (Johnson, 1994; Blount & Wells, 1992; Delpit, 1995; Johnson, Staton, & Jorgensen-Earp, 1995). For instance, it is assumed within this model that if a student cannot read, tracking a student into a remedial reading course should cure the problem. What programs like this lack is a clear distinction between how the school/institution is implicated in the success or failure of students and how the student is positioned when he/she is deemed the problem (Johnson, 1994; Johnson, Staton, & Jorgensen-Earp, 1995).

By focusing solely on the epidemiological explanations for educational failure, the environmental factors that may be contributing to academic failure are not taken into account. How does this position the student? How can a student feel empowered to succeed if they are constantly bombarded with literature that position them as possessing innate problems that are not related to the school, teacher, or curriculum? The danger in assuming that the problems lie solely within the student or that the student possesses some intellectual insufficiency has the potential to "negatively influence researchers' and educators' characterizations of at-risk students, and so potentially undermine their own efforts" (Fassett, 1999b, p. 9).

Special admissions students: The student against the institution

Because the special admissions program appears to be consistent with the epidemiological models of at-risk students, the program has the potential to leave students feeling isolated from other "normal" college students and disempowered to change their situations. Special admissions programs are designed around the research on the epidemiological models of academic failure because they can provide educators with specific identifiers of which students may be doomed for academic failure. These models also provide educators with cures or prescribed solutions for schools to help improve the academic success of these students. The special admissions program literature tells students that "There is no reason for you to feel ashamed for being enrolled in the [special admissions program]" (The Road to Graduation Student Handbook, 2000, [Director's Letter]). As a child with a medical condition may be told by parents or doctors that his/her condition is no reason for embarrassment, the students of the program are "comforted" to lessen the feeling of difference. The program's literature that we examined presented several examples of how the student is potentially positioned outside the regular operations of the university community.

First, the welcome letter and the program's mission statement present the students with contradictory and confusing messages. The welcome letter states, "We realize that many of you may have strong feelings and reservations about having to participate in the [special admissions program]. In order to be admitted to the [university], however, you knew you would have extra responsibilities" (The Road to Graduation Student Handbook, 2000, [Director's Letter]). Immediately, upon reading the welcome letter, the student is informed that his/her experience at the university will be "different" from the experience of the "normal" student. Not only are the students informed that their experience at the university will be different from other students, but the students may be left with a sense of confusion after reading the program's missions statement. The

mission statement reflects a systematic approach to helping the students succeed at the university. In other words, it is not solely the responsibility of these students to succeed; rather, the program will provide them with many different opportunities for success. The mission statement reads:

Our mission guides and directs program efforts to deliver individualized, comprehensive support services through well planned, timely, efficient, and effective work that is always consistent with the students' academic, personal, and social growth. Our belief in the total quality approach embraces all program components and functions. We value a service-oriented approach, as well as caring and sensitive personal interactions. (The Road to Graduation Student Handbook, 2000, p. 3)

The program offers tutors, mentors, instructors, and other resources that will help the student develop strategies and an overall plan to successfully complete his/her college degree. However, when this message is compared with the message presented in the welcome letter, a student may feel puzzled as to his/her place in the university—is he/she going to be supported by the program, or will he/she be left with the majority of the responsibility to succeed?

Ultimately, the program's literature informs in the student the belief that academic success is solely the responsibility of the student. For instance, the literature tells the student that "you are in the driver's seat" and "you must choose to succeed." (The Road to Graduation Student Handbook, 1997, [Director's Letter]; A Survival Handbook, 1993, p. 10). While this language may give the students an important message, that they must take responsibility for their education, it also suggests that the student is powerless if he/she does not succeed. Moreover, it does not offer information for the students as to how to "drive" once there are in that "driver's seat" and/or offer practical advice regarding choices for success. Thus, these positive metaphors ring hollow and are ultimately little more than platitudes that can further distance a student from the educational enterprise he/she is trying to understand. The special admissions program does qualify this language when it states it offers "talented instructors, tutors, advisors, and mentors that are there to help these students" (The Road to Graduation Student Handbook, 1997, [Director's Letter]). What

immediately follows this passage, however, is the message that it is ultimately up to the student to succeed. (The Road to Graduation Student Handbook, 1997, [Director's Letter]). There is no mention of the role of these instructors, tutors, and mentors in the success of the students, nor how the student will be working with this talented group of people.

Finally, the program's literature can potentially leave the student with a sense of dis-empowerment, or a "me" versus "the institution" mentality in the student. This is ironic when one considers that the institution has developed the special admissions program to help and support academically at-risk students. Nonetheless, after reading the program's handbook, letters, and brochure, a student might feel as though he/she is truly outside the educational enterprise at the university. For example, the student handbook reiterates the student's sole responsibility in success, "the one responsible for your success or failure is you." (The Road to Graduation Student Handbook, 2000, [Director's Letter]) Further, by mentioning the possibility of failure in this welcome letter, students are led to consider their situation as precarious. For a population with many students who may already question their academic abilities, it may prove counter productive to discuss "failure" at such an early point. In Strategies for Success at [the University]: A Survival Handbook for [University] Students (1993), it states that "None of the professors know you. You appear to them to be a successful student, they will assume that you are a successful student and will treat you accordingly" (p. 10). A built in quandary arises in that if the professor knows the special admissions label, he/she may already have formed a perspective on the student and her/his abilities. Questions that might surface in the student include "how do I appear to be successful to my teachers?" "What does a successful student look like?," or even, "If an instructor is aware of a my previous academic performance, he/she might already have decided that I am not going to do well."

Conclusion

We have examined written documents of one special admissions program for university students at-risk. While we make no attempt to generalize beyond this one program, we do believe that the communication contained within these documents is certainly not unique. We believe that the students who receive these and similar messages are indeed dis-advantaged and dis-engaged from the academy and the very programs set up to assist them. Students enter these programs fully aware that they were unable to meet the minimum standards for admission, which can cause them to question their abilities. The practice of basing support services (and related communication) from an epidemiological perspective potentially makes students feel at fault for their academic 'malady.' Students who are conditioned to accept this perspective are further dis-engaged from the institution. We would like to call for more reflective and careful communication and more student-centered models for at-riskness presented in these programs.

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